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ABSTRACT

This paper examines some ethical problems that arose in a study of secondary curriculum, where educational criticism was used as a primary research strategy. A study on the subject of curriculum consonance was conducted in three tenth-grade history classrooms. In its original design, the study was primarily concerned with the correspondence between the intended, actualized, and experienced curricula. Unanticipated problems of an ethical nature began to arise during fieldwork. The ethical aspects of educational criticism are discussed in four parts: (1) background issues and the context of the study, which facilitate the comprehension of the ethical problems that eventually developed; (2) questions about the extent to which informed consent was obtained, and its implications for safeguarding anonymity of informants; (3) what was disclosed, and to whom; and (4) ethical problems created by negative disclosures, informed consent, and the form of the reporting. It is concluded that these problems are of great importance in qualitative inquiry and are exacerbated in significant ways in the conduct of educational criticism. There are no formulaic solutions to ethical problems--they seem endemic to criticism as a form of inquiry. An appendix includes the memorandum sent to participating teachers. (JAZ)

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ETHICAL ISSUES IN THE FIELD: TAKEN BY SURPRISE

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

This paper examines some ethical problems that arose in a study of secondary curriculum where educational criticism was used as the primary research strategy (Thornton, 1985). Educational criticism, in Gail McCutcheon's words, "is intended to heighten readers' comprehension of education-related matters and to encourage reflection about such matters" (1982:171). Significantly, though, educational criticism does not merely aspire to describe what is, as do other qualitative methodologies, but it also points to what ought to be. I will argue that this normative emphasis and the likelihood of close, almost collegial researcher-informant relationships, coupled with the ethical problems often associated with qualitative methods (see Cassell, 1982), raise special ethical difficulties for educational critics.

Specifically, the ethical aspects of educational criticism will be discussed in four parts. First, I will outline some background issues and the context of my study (Thornton, 1985) -- this will allow readier comprehension of the ethical problems that eventually developed. Second, I will raise questions about the extent to which informed consent was obtained, and its implications for

This paper was presented as part of a Symposium, "Ethnical Concerns in Qualitative Research: Perspectives on Educational Connoisseurship and Educational Criticism," at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, April 1986. I am indebted to David Flinders for his thoughtful critique of an earlier draft.

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safeguarding anonymity of informants. Third, I will deal with the question, "what was disclosed, and to whom?" The fourth issue in many ways parallels the third: What ethical problems are created by negative "vivid renderings"?

Joan Cassell has identified four "ideal" research modes and the degree to which each is likely to raise ethical problems (1982:10-14): biomedical experimentation, psychological experimentation, survey research, and fieldwork. Broadly speaking, Cassell argues that the likelihood of particular ethical problems increases along the continuum from biomedical experimentation to fieldwork. She writes:

> Moving along the spectrum of research, from biomedical research at one pole to fieldwork at the other, the asymmetry of the research relationship and the investigators' conceptual control diminish... [In fieldwork] weighing potential harms against benefits before research is carried out becomes an exercise in creativity, with little relevance to the ethical dilemmas and problems that may emerge during the research (Cassell, 1982:14).

The role of judgment in educational criticism exacerbates the ethical problems associated with fieldwork in the social sciences. Further ethical problems are created for the educational critic by the close, even what Nel Noddings has called "relational" (1984:150), association between critic and informant. I shall return to this latter point below.

As I noted above, the remainder of this paper will recount and reflect upon some ethical problems that arose in my study of secondary curriculum. These problems, as I hope will become clear, are ones that could readily arise in other studies utilizing educational criticisms. Moreover, while I can claim no special expertise in ethics, the problems I lay out hold great import for the continued development and utilization of educational criticism as a mode of inquiry. I believe that it is important for researchers in any mode of inquiry to understand its potentialities and limitations if that mode is to develop. Further, there is

a practical dimension to examining the ethics of educational criticism: In view of the many boldly negative "vivid renderings" of teachers and classrooms, will school people long open their doors to critics they perceive as unethical?

Some consideration of the circumstances of my study of will help clarify the context and why this paper is subtitled "Taken by Surprise." The topic of my study was "Curriculum Consonance." It was conducted in three, tenth-grade history classrooms. Before I began fieldwork, and for some time during fieldwork, my working definition of consonance was the degree of correspondence between what teachers planned to teach, what ensued in classrooms, and what students learned. In other words, consonance was defined as a straightforward measure of relationship. This seemed a simple-enough subject. Certainly there appeared to be few of the dimensions of risk usually associated with ethical concerns. Under these circumstances, I largely discounted the possibility of ethical problems arising.

Fieldwork was conducted at a school that I shall call Taylor High. Significantly, I previously had planned to conduct the study at another school. The teachers at this school, after several months' deliberation, decided that they did not want to participate in my study. This worried me, for unless I gained access to a school by late winter it would be too late in the school year to conduct the study. Thus, when I approached the principal and teachers at Taylor High, I was anxious to gain their consent.

The principal at Taylor High, Mr. O'Connor, was willing for me to conduct research at his school as long as the teachers were willing to participate. He told me that he had received "complaints" from parents about one teacher, Mr. Carson, and that he would be "interested" in my findings about Carson. I saw no harm in the principal receiving my study (if this was acceptable to the teachers)

as the study was primarily concerned with the correspondence between the intended, actualized, and experienced curricula, and not, I naively assumed, with teacher evaluation.

When I met with the three history teachers, I explained that I was interested in curriculum consonance. A few days later, I sent the teachers a memorandum that summarized the aims of the study (see Appendix). The study would use pseudonyms throughout, and the name of the school and community would be changed. Only a few people at Taylor High would be able to identify true identities, and the real name of the school would not be publicly disclosed. Further, I told the teachers that it was a qualitative study, hence I could not be sure of the substance or structure of the educational criticisms I would eventually write. Each of the three teachers said he willingly would cooperate, although I was asked: "Is this an evaluation?" I replied, "not primarily... though inevitably there will be evaluative elements." All three men appeared satisfied. Moreover, all were told at the outset that Mr. O'Connor would have access to my findings. The three teachers did not seem disturbed by this. (Later, it became apparent that all three men liked and trusted Mr. O'Connor.)

Two questions should be posed at this point: Had I obtained informed consent from the teachers? How is this related to safeguards for the anonymity of informants? At the time of my entry to Taylor High, I believed I had taken every reasonable step to obtain informed consent. Now, I am more hesitant to make such a claim. Recalling Cassell's earlier remark (1982:14), it is not at all clear what "informed" consent means in fieldwork. In 1969, Howard Becker wrote of one of the hazards of obtaining "informed" consent:

> Even if the social scientist has pointed out the possible consequences of a report, the person whose organization or community is to be studied is unlikely to think it will happen to him; he cannot believe this fine fellow, the social scientist with whom he now sees eye to eye, would actually do something to harm him (1969:272).

Becker's observation raises but one of the reasons why informed consent has a quite different meaning in qualitative research from its traditional meaning in, say, psychological experiments. To a considerable degree, my informants were dependent on my judgment that the study would not harm them nor would they "be treated solely as means to researchers' ends" (Cassell, 1982:21). This latter possibility Cassell terms "wrongs."

My initial underestimation of the potential for ethical problems made these problems more difficult when they arose. Thus, while the teachers understood that my findings would be "emergent," I had not considered what ethical difficulties this might cause. Specifically, as I analyzed the data after fieldwork, I became increasingly convinced that consonance as a straightforward measure of relationship held scant explanatory power. That is, it did not explain why events turned out as they did. This type of consonance I have since called "technical" consonance (Thornton, in process) -- it offered little basis from which to judge educational worth. What I <u>really</u> wanted to examine was not "technical" consonance, but "substantive" consonance -- the educational effects of the relationships between the intended, actualized, and experienced curricula (Thornton, in process). Significantly, from an ethical standpoint, the use of "substantive" consonance considerably increased the evaluative component of the study. One cannot assess educational worth without making educational judgments. Although the teachers had been warned that the findings of the study would be "emergent" in nature, was this new development one to which the teachers had given informed consent?

Certainly the use of "substantive" consonance made the issue of confidentiality more pressing. The teachers realized that, despite pseudonyms, they, at least, would be recognizable to each other, and to the principal. From the outset, then, everyone understood that protection of anonymity was

necessarily incomplete. As the study became more evaluative, though, anonymity became more critical. Yet, even if the reports written for the school people carefully disguised individual identities, the dissertation itself eventually would become a public document. In the dissertation, it would be impossible to obscure the true identities of the teachers from one another, and from the principal. Did the teachers' acceptance of admittedly "limited" anonymity overlook its possibly harmful consequences?

At this point in the study, I was confronted with serious ethical concerns. Could I ethically proceed with the study? Fortunately, the issues of informed consent and protection of anonymity simply did not arise as significant problems with the teachers. When I approached them, shortly before I finished writing, each teacher graciously agreed that I should report my findings as I "saw fit." Their disarming trust in my judgment, of course, did not diminish my ethical obligations to them, but it did encourage me to proceed with the study.

Now I had to confront the critical questions: "What to disclose, and to whom?" I shall use the case of Mr. Carson as an illustration; in his case, full disclosure was most likely to do harm. Specifically, the central problem was that the study's findings could damage Carson's chances for professional advancement. You will recall that the principal had been concerned about Carson's teaching performance, and that I had promised Mr. O'Connor access to my research.

After the first couple of weeks in Mr. Carson's classroom, I felt there were indeed areas of his teaching and curriculum planning that required improvement. Far more than with the other two teachers, my portrayal of Carson placed conflicting ethical demands upon me. These demands fell into two broad categories: The contractual and the relational.

There were several dimensions to the contractual demands. One of these was the scholarly demands of the university. I was obliged to produce original research that adhered to scholarly standards of accuracy and disclosure. My dissertation committee were the primary judges and audience, and they (properly) expected a work that upheld traditional scholarly standards.

Another dimension of my contractual responsibility was to the research method I was using, educational criticism. The viability of educational criticism as a mode of inquiry, as with other modes of inquiry, is assessed by its success in illuminating its objects of investigation. Thus, it was particularly important that my study serve to validate educational criticism as a research mode.

In contrast to these contractual demands were relational demands (Noddings, 1984). I spent several months in close contact with the three teachers and their students. With each teacher, an easy familiarity and mutual-regard soon developed. Doubtless, my background as a high school history teacher led to growing empathy -- many of the trials and tribulations of these teachers' professional lives were familiar to me. Indeed, our relationships sometimes bordered on the collegial. It does not take much imagination to grasp that, in these circumstances, relational factors have particular importance.

As Nel Noddings has argued, the ethical standards associated with "caring" relationships, unlike contractual relationships, are not rule-governed (1984:54-57). Persons take precedence over principles. How could the demands of the contractual and the relational be reconciled? Specifically, how could they be reconciled in Mr. Carson's case?

Although at the time the possible choices were not so plain to me, I think there were three ways of looking at the problem.

First, I could choose full disclosure. This view has been advocated by a number of researchers. For example, James Spradley (1976) has argued that the results of studies should be made available for purposes of public knowledge and of reform, even at the risk of harming or wronging some informants. Similarly, Becker has warned that researchers can fall into "an overly sentimental view of the harm those he studies may suffer" (1969:275). Of course, we would want to add as a proviso that damaging information that could do no conceivable good should not be disclosed (see Cassell, 1982:17, f.n.3; Johnson, 1982).

In Carson's case, full disclosure could have served worthy purposes. (1) There were areas of his professional practice, such as curriculum planning and expository instruction, where improvement was clearly desirable. Perhaps O'Connor could have used a full report on Carson as a means of helping the teacher improve his professional performance. Presumably this would also benefit Carson's students.

A second approach is that of writing multiple reports. In this view, information is disclosed on a basis of where it is likely to be influential in bringing about some worthy end. Thus, blunt condemnation seldom helps people improve their performance and, therefore, the report tendered to people like Carson should praise as well as point out problems. The report to the principal, on the other hand, would be franker.

The writing of multiple reports, however, raises two vexing questions: Is it truthful? Is it ethical? On the first question, Lee Cronbach and his Associates expressed a view that I endorse:

> We see little likelihood that a professional evaluation will falsify data. To present facts in a palatable manner is not falsification; we consider it appropriate, for example, for him to go out of his way to praise some program features before turning to its shortcomings (Cronbach and Associates, 1980:201).

Whether multiple reports are ethical, however, is a more troubling question. When I wrote Mr. Carson's reports, I did not feel multiple reports posed ethical problems. Thus, when Mr. Carson told me that his preferred form of feedback was a three or four page summary of my findings, that was what I provided him. In that summary, I attempted to be generous, while suggesting where improvement might be secured. While no significant element of the full report was overlooked in the summary, certainly I attempted "to present the facts in a palatable manner" (Cronbach and Associates, 1980:201).

As is evident from my tone, my discomfort with the ethics of writing multiple reports has grown in the two years since the study was completed. Like full disclosure, writing multiple reports is based on utilitarian assumptions. Now I am more inclined to put the relational before the contractual. From a strictly contractual view I could have presented Mr. Carson with a far more negative summary. He had consented to participate in my study knowing full-well that I was not sure what my findings would be. I decided that such a narrow view of the contractual arrangement would wrong Mr. Carson, if not harm him. Utilitarian ethics can easily do a disservice to informants. Once we put contractual obligations above persons, we are, in Cassell's apt words, treating informants "solely as means to researchers' ends" (1982:21). As Noddings has observed, there are inherent limitations to the guidance to be found in contractual views of ethics. Although it is admittedly an extreme example, we should recall that Nazi war criminals at Nuremberg justified their actions on the grounds that they were merely obeying the rules. Noddings put the issue this way:

> Laws, manifestos, and proclamations are not, on this account, either empty or useless; but they are limited, and they may support immoral as well as moral actions. Only the individual can be truly called to ethical behavior, and the

> individual can never give way to encapsulated moral guides, although she may safely accept them in ordinary, untroubled times (1984:103).

Embracing the relational view, of course, raises a major question about the conduct of educational criticism. Will the critic be able to criticize? Particularly, will the critic be able to render negative judgments? If not, the uses of this mode of inquiry would be extremely limited. One possible solution to this dilemma is, in cases where it seems warranted, allow informants the right of reply. This reply could be included somewhere in the report. It is worth noting that some scholars have gone even further in their advocacy of protection of informants. Barry MacDonald (1976) has suggested that informants control their own portrayal. To my mind, this would destroy the credibility of the research or evaluation project. I doubt that such portrayals would be taken seriously. Moreover, how would we reconcile conflicting informant demands for portrayals of a setting that are mutually-exclusive? Consider, for example, a description of Carson's classroom. What if his portrayal and that of his students differed? Who would decide?

One further point is necessary. I had promised the principal access to my findings. There was a chance that my findings could harm Mr. Carson's career. As it turned out, this issue was "resolved" by happenstance. Before the final reports and summaries were finished, Mr. O'Connor was replaced as principal. The three teachers had agreed to Mr. O'Connor seeing the reports, not to the new principal. To have revealed this information to the new principal would have been a breach of faith. No information was provided to the new principal, although it is conceivable that he or she could hear of my study and obtain the dissertation. In this sense, the ethical problem has not been entirely resolved.

Before concluding, a brief word is needed on the practice of vivid rendering. My use of this means of disclosure presented problems almost parallel to those of "what to report to whom." Elliot Eisner described the process of rendering as follows:

> What critics do or should try to do is not to translate what cannot be translated but rather create a rendering of a situation, event, or object that will provide pointers to those aspects of the situation, event or object that are in some way significant (Eisner, 1985:224).

In Carson's case, I think the problems associated with vivid rendering are probably plain by now. Moreover, it obviously is related to the issue of confidentiality discussed earlier. Certainly I wanted to present a balanced view of Mr. Carson's classroom -- both the good and the not-so-good. Yet, there was a potential that my criticism could be boldly negative. After all, the critic does not let the "facts speak for themselves." While all writing ultimately is a selection, this is even more the case in educational criticism. As a critic, my task was to discern what was educationally significant, not merely to record what happened.

There is no simple solution to the ethical problems raised by vivid rendering. This form of disclosure is at the heart of educational criticism. Yet, if boldly negative, it can do harm. With one exemplary teacher in my study, like Sara Lawrence Lightfoot studying "good" schools (1983), vivid rendering made extant laudatory practice. This raises few ethical problems. In cases like Carson's, however, it was much more difficult to both point to educational significance and not be boldly negative. I believe a reasonable balance was struck in Carson's case but the problem is one that will continue to haunt educational critics.

In closing, let me summarize my case and make a few observations. This paper has raised ethical problems which focus on informed consent, the practice of vivid rendering, and the form of reporting. I have argued that these problems hold great importance in qualitative inquiry generally, and suggested that they are exacerbated in significant ways in the conduct of educational criticism. There are no formulaic solutions to these ethical problems -- they seem endemic to criticism as a form of inquiry. In this light, they clearly deserve closer scrutiny than they have had to date, and should be dealt with explicitly as novice critics learn their craft. Certainly in my own future conduct of educational criticism I shall devote much fuller consideration to ethical questions before the study begins, and will report to informants potential ethical difficulties that arise in the course of fieldwork and writing. It is my hope that increased attention and sensitivity to ethical problems will assist other novice critics avoid being "taken by surprise."

Endnote

(1) This raises still another question: What are the researcher's ethical responsibilities regarding how his or her findings are used?

APPENDIX

MEMORANDUM TO PARTICIPATING TEACHERS

TO: Bill Bauer
Tom Voisin
Ted Carson

February 15, 1983

As you know, there are two main aspects of my study:

1. The relationship between (a) what you intend to teach
(b) what you do teach
(c) what students learn;

2. What is the substance of your curriculum?

I thought it might help if you had a copy of my plan so that you would know what to expect. Also, I have to organize times for my interviews of both you teachers and six students from each class. I have to complete these interviews before the unit of instruction begins. So my schedule is as follows:

BEFORE (entering the classroom) --

(a) interview each of you three teachers for about one hour
(b) interview (individually) 6 students from each class
(c) examine unit outlines, relevant curriculum documents, and instructional materials such as textbooks.

OBSERVATIONS --

(d) sit in your classroom and write down what happens for the duration of the unit.

AFTER (the observations) --

(e) re-interview the same 6 students
(f) have copies of unit test scores

I hope this clears up just what will happen. Thank you again for your cooperation, it is greatly appreciated.

Steve Thornton

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